

# *The Anglican Historical Society of New Zealand* *Te Rōpu Hītori o te Hāhi Mīhinare ki Aotearoa*

## *Hobhouse or Harper as First Bishop of Christchurch?*

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### **Abstract:**

Prior to his appointment as Bishop of Nelson, Edmund Hobhouse almost became Bishop of Christchurch. The events of 1854-1856 dealing with his acceptance of the nomination and later the withdrawal are examined.

The Bishop of Oxford, Samuel Wilberforce, described Edmund Hobhouse in the following words: 'He is one of the truest, gentlest, most humble-minded, most unselfish and pure-minded men I ever met ... He never flinches from adhering to a principle but is most winning and full of love to all. No one can know him without loving him. His judgement is clear and unwavering.'<sup>1</sup>

Hobhouse was to need all these qualities to cope with the confusion and disappointment that lay ahead of him.

One of the most important features in the plan of the Canterbury Association which founded the Canterbury Settlement in New Zealand in 1850, was the provision of a bishop and clergy, but as late as April 1854, Canterbury was still without a Bishop. After years of trying, unsuccessfully, to find one suitable person, suddenly there were two who were willing to accept nomination. They were **Edmund Hobhouse** and **Henry John Chitty Harper**.

The events leading up to the final selection of a nominee may be traced mainly through a series of 19 letters in the Lord Lyttelton Papers which are housed at the Canterbury Museum in Christchurch. They are all letters written to Lord Lyttelton who had been the chairman of the Committee of Management of the Canterbury

Association and who, even after the winding up of the Association, remained a central figure in all matters relating to the Bishopric.

The Bishop of New Zealand, George Augustus Selwyn, visited England in 1854-55 and spoke to both Hobhouse and to Harper about serving in New Zealand. Hobhouse said: 'I heard nothing from Bishop Selwyn on any subject till he came to Oxford for the Trinity Ordination in late May 1854. He then broached the Canterbury Question, saying that Mr. Henry O'Brien had been proposed. If he declined, would I consent to be nominated?'<sup>2</sup>

He told Selwyn to discuss the matter with the Bishop of Oxford in whose diocese he served. According to the Rev Edward Coleridge, assistant master at Eton College, Selwyn saw the Bishop of Oxford but 'did not leave any instruction of any sort on the subject of the Lyttelton Bishopric.' Coleridge suggested to Lord Lyttelton that if he thought Hobhouse a possible candidate, he should ask J. Chapman who was the Bishop of Colombo for his comments.<sup>3</sup> Chapman also recommended Hobhouse strongly.<sup>4</sup> Eleven days later, the Bishop of Oxford claimed that Selwyn had pressed a post on Hobhouse. He consulted the Bishop of Salisbury and then told Lyttelton: 'We both agreed that for the mere general service under Selwyn which he proposed,

Hobhouse ought not to give up so very useful a post as he fills at Oxford, but that if the call were to the Episcopate he ought to go.’<sup>5</sup>

On receiving this information, Lyttelton appears to have written to Hobhouse asking him if he would accept nomination as bishop.

In reply, Hobhouse said: ‘I will abide by the Bishop of Oxford’s decision. He can judge, and I cannot, whether it is best for the Church, that I should work in my present sphere, or in a new one. He refused the Bishop of New Zealand’s first request for my services, because it asked for no definite post, but I believe, that he would not have refused them, had they been asked specifically for the See of Lyttelton. If you know His Lordship’s mind, you may feel at liberty to proceed accordingly.’<sup>6</sup>

Following this, the Bishop of Oxford wrote again to Lyttelton: ‘I dare not refuse E. Hobhouse to the work of a Bishop in New Zealand because I believe him to be eminently fit for laying there the foundations of the Church.’<sup>7</sup>

The Bishop of Colombo wrote to Lyttelton on 5 March 1856: ‘Having been at Oxford for a few days with Hobhouse, I must tell you how thankful I am that he is now nominated to the very responsible charge of the Chief Pastorate in your cherished colony.’<sup>8</sup>

It is clear that Lyttelton, Wilberforce, Chapman, and Hobhouse all considered that the nomination had been finalised. Meanwhile, in the Canterbury Settlement an event had taken place that was to cause confusion and misunderstanding. Early in November 1855 Bishop Selwyn, accompanied by the Rev John Coleridge Patteson, and one of Harper’s sons, had attended meetings of clergy and laity at Lyttelton and at Christchurch.

According to Henry Sewell, who had been sent out to wind up the affairs of the Canterbury Association, Selwyn said, ‘I know if you ask Mr. Harper he will accept, and I recommend him.’<sup>9</sup>

The Lyttelton Times report of the Lyttelton meeting makes no mention of Hobhouse, but records that both Selwyn and Patteson spoke in favour of Harper and that the third resolution passed at that meeting stated: ‘That it would greatly promote the interests of the church in this Province, if the Rev. Henry Harper should be appointed to the bishopric of Christchurch, but that if any difficulties should occur to prevent his appointment, they would thankfully accept any person who might be approved of by the authorities in England, acting in communication with the confidential friends of the Bishop of New Zealand.’<sup>10</sup>

James Edward FitzGerald was Superintendent of Canterbury at this time. On 11 November, which was after the meetings had taken place, he wrote to his close friend John Robert Godley, who had been the Canterbury Association’s Chief Agent in Canterbury from 1849-52: ‘I wanted to write to you about the Bishop’s visit and the Governor’s visit. I hope you will get Hobhouse sent out before you get our resolutions here about Harper. The reason we passed that resolution was that the Bishop of New Zealand said Mr. Harper was the only suitable man he met in England who would positively come out. He spoke in the highest terms of Hobhouse but did not say positively that we could depend on him coming out. But still I hope you will have sent Hobhouse.’<sup>11</sup>

A month before the meetings, Robert Sewell of Radley College near Abingdon, told Lord Lyttelton that his brother Henry had reported from the Canterbury settlement that Hobhouse’s name was being mentioned in New Zealand as a possible bishop.<sup>12</sup> It is possible that Hobhouse’s name may have been mentioned at the Christchurch meeting, but if the newspaper report is accurate, it was not mentioned at the Lyttelton meeting.

News of the Canterbury meetings and the petition reached England early in 1856.

Hobhouse was informed of this by Lyttelton and in reply wrote: 'I have written to Mr. Harper desiring him to put all delicacy towards me out of the question and expressing the hope that he will be able to accept the Appointment ... I think it is important that every effort should be made to give effect to the preference expressed in the united voice of the Clergy and Laity of the Colony ... I shall most contently stay with my English Postn.'<sup>13</sup>

At this stage Hobhouse appears to have withdrawn his acceptance of nomination.

Lyttelton also informed the Rev Edward Coleridge about the Canterbury petition and he replied: 'Sure I am however, that the Bishop [Selwyn] would greatly desire to have Harper as Bishop of Lyttelton, and that he would be a better man in all respects for the situation than Hobhouse, although he would have been a very good appointment.'<sup>14</sup>

Harper received word of the petition directly from Selwyn. He informed Lyttelton on 1 April: 'If in your opinion and that of others who have taken part in the nomination of Mr. Hobhouse, matters have gone so far as to render it desirable that he should be appointed to the Bishopric, I am ready to decline it. If, however, this should not be the case, I am prepared to take the proposal into my serious consideration.'<sup>15</sup>

A letter from Archdeacon Abraham in Auckland was received by Hobhouse and he sent it to Lyttelton on 2 April, but this did not make the situation any clearer. Hobhouse wrote: 'The next letter from G.A.NZ will, I doubt not, throw some light on his apparent change of mind. Till that comes to hand we must suspend all judgement'<sup>16</sup>

On 4 April the Bishop of Oxford who was still in favour of Hobhouse as Bishop, offered his explanation for Selwyn's apparent change of mind: 'I presume Selwyn thought I had decided against Hobhouse for bishop at Chch instead of as a mere unattached chaplain and so took Harper as the best second man.'<sup>17</sup>

Harper agreed with Lord Lyttelton, that when Selwyn went to the meetings at Canterbury, he thought that Hobhouse had declined the Bishopric. Yet Harper had some doubt where he stood in the matter: 'I am not quite satisfied that it is altogether open to me to consider the offer of the meetings. If I do not mistake, the Bishop's communication with Mr. Hobhouse on the subject of the Bishopric was subsequent to that which he had with myself in the beginning of August 1854 and which was brought to an apparent close, on Sept 1st of the same year.'<sup>18</sup>

Because of his uncertainty, Harper laid the whole case before the Bishop of Oxford whom he believed knew what Selwyn had proposed to Hobhouse.

Hobhouse once again said that he would write to Harper begging him to consider the choice as quite open to him, but if he did not feel free to do this, the matter should go to arbitration. On 19 April, Harper had almost decided to accept nomination and four days later when he received a letter from the Bishop of Oxford, he informed Lyttelton: 'I enclose the Bishop of Oxford's letter, and I beg to signify to your Lordship that I am desirous of accepting the Bishopric of Christchurch, and I hope I am not doing wrong in requesting your Lordship to take the necessary steps to obtain from the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Colonial Secretary their sanction to my appointment.'<sup>19</sup>

Harper was consecrated at Lambeth Palace, travelled out to Canterbury with his family and was installed as the first Bishop of Christchurch on Christmas Day 1856 at St Michael and All Angels.

Who was to blame for the confusion and misunderstandings? Some blamed Selwyn for changing his mind, but Hobhouse showing great charity, told Lyttelton: 'For it matters very little to the Church at large, whether I am charged with fickleness or self-sparing - but it is of great moment that so important a name as GANZ

should be quite unblemished ... The matter has resolved itself simply into a misapprehension then of the results of our conference at Richmond March '55 and there it must rest.' <sup>20</sup>

Sir John Patteson who was a judge, a trustee of the Canterbury Bishopric Fund and the father of the Rev J. C. Patteson who later became Bishop of Melanesia, was of the opinion also that when Selwyn went to the Canterbury meetings, he had no idea that Lyttelton and others had nominated Hobhouse. He based this view on a letter he had received from his son from which he quoted briefly: 'Nov 7 [1855] - Up till past one this morning looking over Canterbury papers with the Bishop. I think he will manage to get Mr. Harper to be the Bishop - but don't mention this. I am to communicate with Hobhouse of Merton, offering him in fact the Archdeaconry of Nelson - keep this quiet also.'

It was discovered later that both Hobhouse and Charles John Abraham, Archdeacon of Waitemata, and later first bishop of Wellington,

had written to Selwyn on the subject of the nomination.

The judge said that he had written also to his son earlier in 1855 mentioning Hobhouse's name, but that this letter may have been lost at sea and the son did not receive it.

Sir John concluded: 'I argue from this that Bishop Selwyn had not heard from Abraham when he spoke of Harper at Canterbury and had not received the second letter from Hobhouse. Very possibly he had found out his misconstruction of Hobhouse's first letter, and as he had proposed Harper (as you now inform me) in the first instance, had on the removal of the obstacle as to endowment at once mentioned his name at Canterbury, but this is only my conjecture.' <sup>21</sup>

The details of the letters by Abraham and Hobhouse to Selwyn are not known, but there is little doubt that the whole affair would not have occurred if both the Bishop of Oxford and Bishop Selwyn had been more specific about what was being offered to Hobhouse.

## Acknowledgement

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GP = John Robert Godley Papers. LP = Lord Lyttelton Papers Folder 12.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Bishop of Oxford to Lord Lyttelton: 10.1.56 LP - item 304.

<sup>2</sup> E Hobhouse to Lord Lyttelton: 9.4.56 LP - item 322.

<sup>3</sup> E Coleridge to Lord Lyttelton: 7.1.56 LP - item 302.

<sup>4</sup> Bishop of Colombo to Lord Lyttelton: 10.1.56 LP - item 305.

<sup>5</sup> Bishop of Oxford to Lord Lyttelton: 21.1.56 LP - item 308.

<sup>6</sup> E Hobhouse to Lord Lyttelton: 25.1.56 LP - item 309.

<sup>7</sup> Bishop of Oxford to Lord Lyttelton: 2.2.56 LP - item 311.

<sup>8</sup> Bishop of Columba to Lord Lyttelton: 5.3.56 LP - item 312.

<sup>9</sup> *The Journal of Henry Sewell 1853-7*, ed W. David McIntyre, Vol II, p.270, Whitcoulls, 1980.

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- <sup>10</sup> *Lyttelton Times* 10.11.55, pp.6-7.
- <sup>11</sup> J E FitzGerald to J.R. Godley: 6.11.55. GP. Vol 3. Transcript, p.162.
- <sup>12</sup> R B Sewell to Lord Lyttelton: 5.10.55 LP - item 294.
- <sup>13</sup> E Hobhouse to Lord Lyttelton: 29.3.56 LP - item 314.
- <sup>14</sup> E Coleridge to Lord Lyttelton: 29.3.56 LP - item 315.
- <sup>15</sup> H J C Harper to Lord Lyttelton: 1.4.56 LP - item 316.
- <sup>16</sup> E Hobhouse to Lord Lyttelton: 2.4.56 LP - item 318.
- <sup>17</sup> Bishop of Oxford to Lord Lyttelton: 4.4.56 LP - item 319.
- <sup>18</sup> H J C Harper to Lord Lyttelton: 7.4.56 LP - item 321.
- <sup>19</sup> H J C Harper to Lord Lyttelton: 23.4.56 LP - item 326
- <sup>20</sup> E Hobhouse to Lord Lyttelton: 30.3.57 LP - item 341
- <sup>21</sup> Sir J Patterson to Lord Lyttelton: 17.4.56 LP - item 324